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ABSTRACT

Students in 4 sections of a college reading and study strategies course at a comprehensive midwestern university (part of a special admission program for low achieving students) completed an open-ended assignment in which they wrote about their memories of learning to read. A free-form analysis sheet was developed to sort out the information in the reading autobiographies. The main categories of information were: positive and negative models and activities for early literacy; school influences on reading at the elementary, junior high, and high school levels; points at which changes occurred in reading behavior; and current reading attitudes and behavior. A total of 40 reading autobiographies were analyzed. Results indicated that: (1) 22 students made positive comments about early (before school) influences on reading, 7 made negative comments, and 6 expressed ambivalent feelings; (2) 11 students made positive comments, 10 made negative, and 8 made ambivalent comments about elementary school reading experiences; (3) 3 students described positive experiences, 2 made negative, and 3 made ambivalent comments concerning junior high school reading experiences; (4) 12 students described negative experiences related to high school reading, 9 made positive comments, and 7 had ambivalent feelings; (5) 14 of 16 students mentioned reading aloud as a negative experience; and (6) current reading was described in almost all cases as done only when assigned. By listening to students through their reading autobiographies, educators can become more sensitive and responsive to students' needs. (RS)

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# Reading Autobiographies Written by Special Admission College Freshmen

A Paper Presented at the College Reading Association Meeting in Crystal City, VA, November 1-3, 1991.

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When it comes to reading I'm a nerd, I don't hangout.

## Introduction

These words were written by one of our students in his reading autobiography. A reading autobiography assignment was given to the students enrolled in freshman college reading classes. The catalog description of this course includes these words:

> A course for students whose chances of success in college will be significantly improved through intensive work in communication skills.

Our students enter the university through a special admissions program because of low academic achievement, low class standing in high school, and/or and ACT composite score of 19 or below. These students are then interviewed and receive special testing before admission is complete. Included in this testing is a test of reading comprehension which is one of the determining factors in the students' placement in College Reading. They are each assigned a counselor to follow them through their college program, and most of them are enrolled in special sections of math, English, and speech as well. The

guiding principle of this program is stated as:

> The guiding mission of ESP [Educational Services and Programs] is to identify, recruit, and assist otherwise capable students whose pre-college education has not fully enabled them to take maximum advantage of their potential and the opportunities of higher education at NIU. While ESP serves a diverse population, racial minorities and others historically underrepresented in higher education are especially sought.

The basic premise of our College Reading course is to improve students' reading comprehension. It is not a basic reading "skills" course, but rather a course to develop students' abilities to "be readers" (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986).

Our students are poor readers as described by their test results, "I don't know but for some reason, when it comes to tests I just don't do well..."; and reluctant readers as described by their own words, "I suppose the only reason I read now, is because I'm assigned to."

## The Reading Autobiography Assignment

These, then, are the students we serve in our College Reading and Study Strategies courses at our comprehensive

midwestern university. Although there were nine sections of approximately 21 students each in the Fall of 1990, we used the reading autobiographies from only four sections. The instructors in these four sections used a similar approach in assigning this project and this provided a basis for the analysis of the information, while other instructors used a much different assignment. Students in these sections were given an open ended assignment to write about their memories of learning to read. The assignment was given verbally and students were asked to think about reading experiences before school, during the school years, and current feelings about reading. They were asked to identify people and events that "turned them on" or "turned them off" to reading. They were told that they might write this in an informal manner, mnuch as they would write a journal entry, in order to remove the restrictions that might be placed on recall by a formal writing assignment.

We were using reflective writing as a tool to help us get to know our students; to design a college reading porgram to better serve our students; and to analyze, hopefully, why our students fell into the category of poor and/or reluctant readers. Manna and Misheff (1987) talk about the positive aspects of using reflective writing as a tool "to develop a profile of our students' perceptions of conditions in the school and wider

environment that influenced them as readers" (p. 161). According to Judy and Judy (1980), the autobiographical narrative becomes a forum for candid attitudes, values, and opinions.

Are there some negative aspects to using the information from reading autobiographies? Certainly we were aware of the effect of the filter of time on the memories of events, especially events that might be loaded with emotional overtones. Biggs and Bruder (1987) point out some reasons that self-reported data might be suspect: 1) The subject may have no recollection of the event but invents one because of the researcher's question, 2) may have a recollection of the event but is unable to verbalize it, and 3) the reality of the event may not be the same as the memory of it. Perhaps the open-ended nature of our autobiography assignment may have controlled the invention of events to meet the researchers' questions. Biggs and Bruder used a highly structured set of questions in their interviews. Keeping the third point in mind when we analyzed our students' reading autobiographies was also an important perspective. We realized that although the events may not have been exactly as they occurred, the students' perceptions of the events still provided important information in understanding their current feelings about reading.

## What Did Our Students Say About Reading?

After a careful first reading of the autobiographies, we developed an analysis sheet to help sort out the information given to us in narrative form. Our data coding sheet was as free-form and open-ended as our assignment, but it did provide us with categories of information that had appeared in most of the papers during that first read-through. The main categories of information were: 1) positive and negative models and activities for early literacy; 2) school influences on reading at the elementary, junior high, and high school levels; 4) points at which changes occurred in reading behavior; and 5) reading now. For each category the coder was asked to write down illustrative quotes from the students' papers, as appropriate. We were very interested in presenting our students' own words.

### Summary Observations

Although this is not meant to be a quantitative analysis, some counts of types of responses seemed to provide a framework for looking at the students' comments. In all, forty reading autobiographies were analyzed. Papers written by students who were raised in another country and spoke a language other than English as their primary language were omitted. We felt that other factors related to their learning English as a second language might influence their autobiographies. Not all students

responded to each category as the assignment was so open ended. We found it interesting that so many students mentioned similar influences on their reading, however.

Of the thirty-five students who wrote about early (before school) influences on reading; twenty-two students made positive comments (mother/sibling read to them, liked alphabet games), seven made negative comments (hated being forced to read), and six expressed ambivalent feelings (mother wanted me to read but punished me if I failed).

School experiences were broken down into three levels, elementary (K-6), junior high (7-8), and high school (9-12). Thirty students wrote about influences at the elementary school level: eleven students made positive comments (teacher made it fun, teacher read to us), ten students made negative comments (hated reading out loud), and eight students were ambivalent (liked it sometimes but not other times).

Junior high school experiences received the fewest number of comments. Only eight students wrote directly about the junior high reading experience. Of those, three described positive experiences, two described negative experiences, and three were ambivalent. Our suspicion is that junior high school aged students have many other things on their minds and reading is of only passing interest, even as a memory.

In the responses related to high school experiences, twenty-eight students responded. Reading was again seen as an important skill, "the only way you would make it through life," but giving many students serious problems. Twelve students described negative experiences related to reading, nine described positive experiences, and seven expressed ambivalent feelings.
The change for most students from "reading as fun" to "reading as boring" seemed to come at the high school level. A distinction was made at this point between assigned and pleasure reading by many students.

Sixteen students mentioned reading aloud as a factor in their school reading experiences. For two of these students it was a positive experience, but for fourteen of them it was a negative experience.

Current reading habits for our students, in almost all cases, were described as "something I do only when it's assigned."

## Early Reading Experiences

Some of the positive early experiences mentioned by our students include being read to, reading games (flash cards, alphabet games), and the attention given to them when they tried to read. One student wrote, "My older brother would teach me how

to spell my name and learn my alphabet. He would make my name into a song which would be very fun for me." Parents, grandparents and solder siblings who cared and encouraged success were also seen as important; " If my mother wouldn't have helped me and cared about how I was doing I wouldn't have been here in college today." Other positive factors mentioned were parents or others in the home who were observed reading and shared that reading with them. "My father would sit in the living room and read the newspaper. I would sit next to him and try to pronounce the words that he picked out for me."

Encouragement from a parent seemed to be a positive factor, but pressure often backfired:

> Thinking back to when I was [in] kindergarten learning to read my mom made these flashcards with words on them and some with letters. I was a very active child so it was hard to get me to settle down to study or learn anything. My mom had this system where if [I] wasn't paying any attention to her she would punish me by either slapping me, pinching me (my mom had long fingernails) or by wooping me when I really got on her nerves or she was in a bad mood.

Other students, as well, mentioned being "forced" to read. "My mother would make me sit down and read or I couldn't go outside. She would yell or get mad. I hated it."

Morrow (1983) writes that one of the characteristics of voluntary good readers is the reading guidance they receive in a supportive literary environment. She cites Bloom (1964) when she writes "a child's reading habits are developed early in life; by sixth grade the type of reader one is going to be has already been established" (p. 222). When we teach our students, as we hopefully do, to look at reading in a more positive light perhaps we are also sending an important message to help them as the next generation of parents and "reading models."

## School Experiences

### Early elementary grades K-3.

In the early elementary grades, K-3, most students mentioned positive reading experiences such as a teacher who made it fun, being able to choose their own books, and friends who liked to read. One student describes her pleasure at being allowed to choose and order her own books and tapes through a school program. Other students mentioned the positive influence of teachers reading to them; "When she read to us it was my favorite part."

One student expressed her frustration at not being allowed to read aloud. If she did, and she really wanted to, the teacher would "punish" her. Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) recognized this as a frustration in the reading autobiographies of good readers they analyzed.

Reading out loud is a common school activity that was described as a negative experience by most of the students who wrote about that subject. Students mentioned being embarassed and nervous about reading out loud. Several said they felt like they were being put-down by the teacher and their classmates whenever they mispronounced a word in oral reading. The tension is described by this student: "My friends and I would go home and read to make sure we knew the material, so the next day in class we would know all the words so we wouldn't be embarassed when it was our turn to read aloud in class." This situation seemed to have the positive effect of reviewing at home, but the negative effect of creating tension or, as one student wrote, "fear" of reading out loud. "Reading aloud in class - Yuk. I was afraid of making mistakes and others laughing." Another student recalled being made to stay in from recess if words were mispronounced during oral reading.

Reading aloud has been documented as a negative aspect of reading in elementary schools for many students, especially poor

readers. Biggs and Bruder (1987) and Bruder and Biggs (1988) studied adult poor or non readers in an attempt to determine when and how reading failure begins. In the first study (Biggs & Bruder, 1987) 91.3% of those interviewed remembered reading aloud, and 60.8% of those said it was a negative experience. The second study (Bruder & Biggs, 1988) looked at oral reading only. "When teachers and other students respond to oral miscues with corrective comments, students report that they feel embarassed and nervous. Poor readers have learned that teachers expect and reward oral reading accuracy" (1988, p. 736). Fifty-six percent of these adults looked at oral reading as a negative experience. When reading ability was considered as a factor, the better readers were not more positive about oral reading. Even among successful college students, a group of student teachers, there was a dislike for "round-robin" oral reading with students saying they were anxious about their mistakes (Johns & Galen, 1979).

The debate about the efficacy of oral reading, however, seems to rage on, especially the relationship of oral reading to the low reading group (Hoffman, 1991). Our sense is that oral reading will be a part of the classroom reading program for a long time to come. We would encourage the sensitivity needed to make oral reading a positive experience, and an awareness of this issue if and when we ask our students to read out loud in the

college reading skills classroom.

Later elementary grades 4-6.

By fourth and fifth grades students started expressing more second thoughts about their reading, both their abilities and their desires to read. One student described being motivated to read until fourth grade and "after that I slipped away." Another says, "fairy tales were fun, then it got boring. We had to read history." Perhaps this student was describing Chall's (1983) "Stage 3" of reading development: the point at which reading is used to learn new ideas. "Learning to read" is one thing; "reading to learn" is quite another.

It was our sense in reading these autobiographies that the move to content area reading was the dividing line for many of our students. Assigned reading became the "enemy." "My personal thoughts and how I feel about reading are basically based upon what material I am actually reading. During school, what I wanted to read wasn't really for me to decide." Reading history was not equated with pleasure nor was any assigned reading.

Junior High grades 7-8.

The junior high years produced the fewest comments about the school effects on reading. Positive and negative experiences were about evenly divided. One thing that did stand out was that the few positive comments dealt with the encouragement of

teachers and friends and literature that spoke to them. One student in particular, who expressed serious doubts about reading up until this point, wrote about class discussions revolving around some authors that inspired him.

> As I grew older and a little more mature I finally started to realize what I was missing out on. While in the seventh and eighth grades, in many of my classes we were discussing popular authors especially black writers; such as Langston Hughes, Alex Hailey, and Richard Wright. When discussing the marvels of these fine writers I began to feel intriqued by their writing as well as their writing style. This sudden interest slowly but surely brought me back into the habit of reading.

Challenging junior high aged students is not an easy task, but keeping them interested in reading seems to be crucial. For this student, junior high was his turning point.

<u>High school grades 9-12.</u>

Our students had a lot to say about reading in high school, and since they were not far beyond this period their memories seemed particularly clear. What was negative for high school

readers? The issue of "the assignment" versus reading for pleasure became particularly important. Our students felt they had little, if any, choice in their reading materials. Oner student wrote; "reading material for school is stuff you have to read and it may not be that important to you. I read books for all my class but most of them do not hold my interest. At home reading is stuff you read for fun or things you enjoy."

Content area reading was frequently referred to as "boring" especially science. Students also felt that they were assigned too much reading. "Reading was getting boring because I had to read a lot more." Many students wrote about not doing the reading assignments and sliding by based on class discussions about books. "The teacher didn't give too many reading assignments, if they did most wouldn't read it. My friends felt like me that reading was stupid and unnecessary."

Friends became another big issue in high school. Students were primarily influenced in a negative direction by friends who didn't read or actually made fun of them if they read. "Most of my friends thought I was crazy because I love to read, and I sometimes prefer reading than going out with them."

Positive high school experiences seemed to revolve around a teacher. A detailed account is provided by this student.

In my last year of high school I'll say we

> read about four books. The books were issued out by the instructor to help get ready for college. He really concentrated and focused on the concept of how to read and read right. He went chapter by chapter with us in every book. The way he set up his studies was on allowing us to have our own test when we thought we were ready. The man really felt for us. He was very compasionet [compassionate] and helpful to us. He made us feel wanted and a part of him. The man really put his life in making sure that we could read clearly.

Wouldn't we all like to be remembered that way by our students? Teachers who suggested "good" books and had lots of books available in the room were also seen as positive influences. Another student writes about a "teacher that inspired me. She worked with me after school. And all the time I will read with her I will feel capable to read in front of her and comfortable."

Teachers were remembered for their negative influence as well. "This teacher...she made me start back hating reading again because she always talking about someone reading. Telling them they not reading up to a high school standard. One day she

call on me to read and she start talking about my reading. And in her class I never read again."

We would like to tell high school teachers, based on our reading autobiographies, to be sensitive to the vulnerability of students' feelings about reading at this level. Students at this age seemed particularly fragile and more than one told us how a negative reading experience in high school made them never want to read again for that teacher. We would also encourage wide-reading on many subjects, with chances to make choices in reading material. Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) found freedom of choice in reading material to be an important factor for students who love to read.

The necessity of mastering content area material in high school indicates the need for emphasis on content area reading skills as well as mastery of the information. Students, especially poor or reluctant readers, need to learn and practice the ins and outs of reading in math, science and history; as well as in literature classes. They need to have a clear purpose for reading.

## What Do Our Students Say Now?

Most of our students wrote about an awareness of their reading difficulties. One said, "My comprehension is poor,

therefore I have to read with complete silence and take my time." Many were able to express their struggle with interest in reading. "It takes me much longer to read something I dislike than something I like." Another student put it this way; "I've never minded reading but if the subject doesn't hold any interest I won't remember half of what I read."

Some students did blame "the test" for their label of poor reader. "I don't know but for some reason, when it comes to tests I just don't do well...my mind seems to blank out." Others wrote about inadequate schools and neighborhood pressures. "When you grow up in a bad neighborhood school can be the last thing on your mind."

The importance of reading was a strong theme running through our students' writing. As one student put it, "in the real world it is all based on reading." The importance of reading to success in college and beyond was expressed by virtually every student. Several students expressed the realization that you need to read and comprehend a great deal not just what is "controlled by interest." One student wrote:

> Now that I am enrolled here...I proved myself correct when I said that reading is very necessary when going to college.
> Experiencing only two weeks of college so far

> I see that this particular college places a great deal of emphasis on reading and listening skills...I do not have to be dependent on the material that I am reading, regardless if it is not action packed or very boring I can still sit down and read the material.

## Some Final Thoughts

We would like to see all of our students become better readers, to improve their reading comprehension, but know that for some it will be an uphill battle. We do believe that by listening to them through their reading autobiographies we can become more sensitive and responsive to their needs. Beyond a measurable improvement in reading comprehension, we hope that we are able to instill, if not a love, a respect for the written word. Although the necessity of reading well enough to survive in college and the "real world" is our primary goal, reading is more than that. Reading is a way to broaden our experiences, to understand our world, and contributes to a better quality of life. One of our students said it more eloquently than we can:

> I think of reading as being some sort of talent. One can be born with the interest of

reading, and one can learn to have the interest. Sometime in my life, I began believing that if a person should take the time to write a book or a novel, there should be thousands, even milions somewhere out there willing to read it. Looking at the situation at a professional or technical point of view, the one who has the talent of writing is actually helping and enducing [inducing] the talent of the reader.

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